



PERFORMANCE  
PHILOSOPHY

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## “ANY SEARCH FOR AN ORIGIN IS HYSTERICAL”: SUMMONING THE GHOST OF J.L. AUSTIN

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### Prologue: Waiting for an Apparition

As in Hamlet, the Prince of a rotten State, everything begins by the apparition of a specter. More precisely, by the waiting for this apparition. The anticipation is at once impatient, anxious, and fascinated....

Derrida 1994, 4

It is with much anticipation that I finally sit down to listen to the recording of British philosopher of language J.L. Austin's lecture "Performatives", given at the University of Gothenburg in 1959. For contained in this archive is the voice of the "father" of a concept that would go on to engender nothing short of an epistemological shift within the humanities in the second half of the twentieth century. It was, after all, Austin who first coined the term "performative" to designate a form of language in which one "does" what one "says"—a form that does not merely describe, but actually produces, a given state of affairs. It was also Austin who, in so doing, jolted the logical positivism that dominated the philosophical landscape of his time by contesting the belief that all linguistic statements must be evaluated according to their truth or falsity. By proposing the then novel idea that saying could also be a form of doing, Austin placed language into the realm of action. Among philosophers of language, he is credited with inaugurating the field of speech act theory. Among performance studies scholars, he is cast as the point of origin in a genealogy tracing the influence of linguistic theory on performance theory.

However, while Austin's legacy was manifold and his influence widespread, he was by no means a prolific writer. Austin only published seven papers in his lifetime. His book publications, too, are scant, numbering a mere three. Aside from his translation of German logician Gottlob Frege's *Die Grundlagen der Arithmetik* (*The Foundations of Arithmetic*), his own books, *Philosophical Papers*, *Sense and Sensibilia*, and *How To Do Things With Words* appeared posthumously (in 1961, 1962, and 1962 respectively). In the forward to *Sense and Sensibilia*, editor G.J. Warnock explains that due to the "unreadable" and "scarcely intelligible" quality of many of Austin's manuscript notes (themselves modeled upon Austin's lecture series, "Problems on Philosophy", given at Oxford in 1947), Warnock was essentially obliged to rewrite them (Austin 1962, viii). It thus follows that the published text is not a reproduction, but rather a reconstruction, of Austin's writing.

The much-celebrated *How To Do Things With Words*, which represents Austin's greatest contribution to speech act theory, and in which his notion of the linguistic performative was first introduced in print, has a similar history, albeit one that played out on both sides of the Atlantic. In 1955, Austin had made a trip to the United States, where he visited both Harvard and Berkley. At Harvard, he delivered a series of twelve lectures under the aegis of the prestigious William James Lectures. In 1962, these lectures were released in print under the playful title *How To Do Things With Words* that Austin himself had chosen in 1955. In their preface to the first edition of the book, editors J.O. Urmson and Marina Sbisa explain that Austin first formulated the book's central ideas in 1939. He further expanded upon them during a series of lectures given at Oxford between the years of 1952 and 1954 under the title "Words and Deeds", before refining them in the William James Lectures. As with the Austin of *Sense and Sensibilia*, then, the Austin of *How To Do Things With Words* was engaged in an iterative writing process in which his set of notes was rewritten and revised for each series of lectures. Like Warnock, Urmson and Sbisa admit that the published text is far from a replica of Austin's written notes. They explain that in the beginnings of the lectures these notes were complete and were fleshed out in full sentences; however, as Austin proceeded, they became more fragmentary and abbreviated. In order to cross-reference the text, the editors thus turned to Austin's notes from the "Words and Deeds" lectures, the notes taken by those who attended his lectures in both the USA and in England, a talk Austin gave on BBC radio in 1956 entitled "Performative Utterances", and the 1959 Gothenburg lecture, "Performatives".

It was with the hope of understanding the complicated status of the authorship of the inaugural text on the performative utterance, and the relationship between the concept of performativity, the modes of its production, and the media through which it was disseminated, that I turned to these archives. My preliminary research quickly revealed that a recording of "Performative Utterances", which aired on the 24<sup>th</sup> of August, 1956, did not survive in the BBC Sound Archives. As with many of the programs from that time, Austin's talk went out live and was not recorded. The BBC did, however, produce a transcript (which is housed in their Written Archive)—a document that I procured and that, as a written record of an oral communication, represents a particular species of writing. Due to some fortuitous timing, my research in Gothenburg was more successful. The proprietors of "Performatives" at The Department of Philosophy, Linguistics and Theory of Science at Gothenburg University had succeeded in digitizing the lecture one week prior to my inquiry, and they generously agreed to share it with me.<sup>1</sup>

When I finally sit down to listen to the recording and thus to encounter Austin's ghost through the medium of his voice, I am surprised by the veil of essentialism that taints my expectation. Like most performance studies scholars, I have closely dissected the deconstructionist readings of Austin by Jacques Derrida, Shoshana Felman, Judith Butler and their followers (See: Derrida 1988, Butler 1993, and Felman 2003). Like any theorist working on the relationship between orality and writing, I am wary of the logocentric valorization of the voice due to its proximity to the transcendental source. I know better than to bestow upon this recording any sort of epistemological superiority over the written word. Yet as I sit down to listen to Austin, it seems that my poststructuralism is suddenly clouded by a rather sentimental wish to access something like his interior "essence". But what is it that I could possibly access through the medium of Austin's voice that remains inaccessible in his writing?

My commitment to performing the role of a fully "present" interlocutor is only reinforced by my awareness that this recording, made on the 2<sup>nd</sup> of October, 1959, just three months before Austin's death from lung cancer at the age of forty-eight, holds the last known public trace of his voice. I thus vow to myself to fulfill my side of the intersubjective exchange to the best of my ability and to participate as conscientiously as possible in the production of meaning. But here, too, I am skeptical. Does my seemingly sincere intention to be ethical not—in fact—cloak some sort of yearning for communion? Recalling the title of Shoshana Felman's important book on Austin, *The Scandal of the Speaking Body: Don Juan with J. L. Austin, or Seduction in Two Languages*, I realize that I am divided. While my *intention* is to be analytical, my *desire* is to be seduced.<sup>2</sup> Conscious of this consciousness—and taking solace in the fact that if nothing else, I am *at least* self-conscious—I press play on my iTunes, and the recording begins.

### Austin's Theory of the Performative Utterance

The Gothenburg recording, the BBC transcript "Performative Utterances", and the published text *How To Do Things With Words*, represent three iterations of the same thesis: that of the performative utterance. Of these three documents, *How To Do Things With Words* is by far the most detailed and extensive elaboration. In it, Austin begins by introducing his concept of the performative utterance by way of contrast with the constative utterance, or descriptive statement. In his second lecture, Austin proposes six conditions that must be met in order for a performative to be deemed "felicitous", or successful. From here on in, he embarks on the project of determining a set of grammatical or lexical criteria that define the performative utterance. This search, however, ends in an impasse, with Austin concluding that the constative utterance is also prone to infelicity while the performative also relies upon certain conventions. Forced to accept the collapse of his performative/constative dichotomy, Austin concludes that it is tautological to speak of performative language: "Once we realize that what we have to study is not the sentence but the issuing of an utterance in a speech situation, there can hardly be any longer a possibility of not seeing that stating is performing an act" (Austin 1975, 139).

From this point on, Austin decides to look beyond the propositional content of the sentence and to "consider the *total situation* in which the utterance is used" (Austin 1975, 52). This leads to

another system of classification: the tripartite division of “locution”, “illocution” and “perlocution”, which articulates the three axes of language that come into play in communication. “Locution” refers to the semantics of a given utterance, “illocution” to the act performed *in* saying something (in other words to what the utterance does), and “perlocution” to the effects or consequences produced *by* the utterance. From here, Austin advances a last taxonomy, this time to elucidate families of speech acts; “verditives” which pronounce judgment, “exercitives” which assert power, “commissives” which communicate obligation or intention, “behabatives” which adopt an attitude, and “expositives” which elucidate arguments (Austin 1975, 151).

### Thursday Evenings and Saturday Mornings: Austin’s Performative Praxis of “Linguistic Phenomenology”

*How To Do Things With Words* concludes with a typical Austinian gesture. Admitting that the thesis expounded in the book is “bound to be a little boring and dry to listen to and digest”, Austin ends with the following invitation: “... I leave to my readers the real fun of applying it in philosophy” (Austin 1975, 164). As an Oxford philosopher, or “ordinary language philosopher”, Austin was concerned first and foremost with everyday language use—with “what we say when, and so why and what we should mean by doing it” (Austin 1961, 129). However, well aware that many philosophers outside his circle were skeptical of the idea that it is possible to make ontological claims about the world through an analysis of mere words, Austin came up with the term “linguistic phenomenology” to describe his methodology:

When we examine what we should say when, what words we should use in what situations, we are looking again not *merely* at words (or ‘meanings’ whatever they may be) but also at the realities we use the words to talk about: we are using a sharpened awareness of words to sharpen our perception of, though not as the final arbiter of, the phenomena. For this reason I think it might be better to use, for this way of doing philosophy, some less misleading name... for instance “linguistic phenomenology”. (Austin 1961, 130)

Thus, although he was working within the tradition of Analytic philosophy, Austin borrowed a term from the Continental tradition to thematize his practice. Here, it is of interest to mention that in 1958, Austin participated in the first meeting on French soil between the major proponents of the Anglo-American and the Continental factions of philosophy. Hosted by the Royaumont Abbey in Northern France, the event brought together such thinkers as J.O. Urmson, Bernard Williams, Gilbert Ryle, Peter Strawson, Willard Quine, Evert Beth, Richard Hare and Austin, on the one hand, and Jean Wahl, Ferdinand Alquié, Herman Van Breda, Lucien Goldmann and, most relevantly, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, on the other. It is known that Austin was familiar with the work of Merleau-Ponty, the leading force in phenomenology at that time. Reports reveal that Austin had studied his 1945 opus *Phenomenology of Perception*, a key text in twentieth century phenomenology that foregrounds the embodied nature of perception and the intersubjective quality of our lived experience. I would thus argue, then, that Austin’s choice of the term “linguistic phenomenology” communicates his sensitivity to the intersubjective nature of the linguistic exchange, which his

theory of performativity would bring to the fore. One might also venture to suggest that it foreshadows the fact that performativity would attract the attention of Analytic and Continental philosophers alike for decades to come.

In this article, I wish to argue that in addition to producing an explicit theorization of the concept of performativity, Austin produced and disseminated his philosophy *in a performative manner*, favoring contexts that privileged the intersubjective. In addition to his university lectures and the BBC talk, Austin also organized more intimate, weekly gatherings in order to discuss various problems in philosophy. The first such meetings took place before the war in the second half of the 1930s, and the second, after the war throughout the 1950s. Both are described in the three prosopographical papers by Sir Isaiah Berlin, George Pitcher, and G.J. Warnock that are included in the volume *Essays on J.L. Austin*, published by the Oxford University Press in 1973.

Beginning in 1936 and continuing on until 1939, a group of no more than seven young Oxford philosophers would gather on Thursday evenings at All Souls College, where Austin had been a fellow since 1933. Austin wished for these meetings to remain informal, and for there to be no obligation to produce or publish any results (Berlin 1973, 9). Topics broached included perception, *a priori* truths, counter-factual statements, and the question of personal identity. For Sir Isaiah Berlin, who participated in the gatherings, these meetings represented “the most fruitful discussions of philosophy” of his life (Berlin 1973, 9). In Berlin’s account, the meetings marked the beginning of what would become known as the school of “Oxford Philosophy” (Berlin 1973, 9).

When Austin returned to Oxford after the war, he organized another series of informal, weekly philosophical discussions that ran throughout the 1950s.<sup>3</sup> These gatherings, which took place on Saturday mornings at various colleges around Oxford, were aptly called “Austin’s Saturday mornings”. There, Austin lead sessions on such works as Aristotle’s *Nichomachean Ethics*, Frege’s *Die Grundlagen der Arithmetik*, Wittenstein’s *Philosophical Investigations*, Merleau-Ponty’s *Phenomenology of Perception* and Chomsky’s *Syntactic Structures*. Again, these titles reflect Austin’s fluency in, and openness to engage with, different philosophical traditions.

Warnock contends that Austin saw philosophy as a “co-operative pursuit” (Warnock 1989, 9). In his words, Austin:

... was not a purveyor or explainer, however competent or critical or learned, of philosophy; he was a maker of it, an actual origin. One had the feeling – not always, but often – that those meetings, which were so unmistakably his own, were not occasions on which philosophy was talked about, or taught, or learned – they were occasions on which it was *done*, at which that actually *happened*, there and then, in which the life of the subject consists.... (Warnock 1989, 45)

I would suggest that today we could use the term “performative” to describe Austin’s method of philosophizing—for it appears that in “doing” the philosophy he was describing, Austin was enacting his own, original sense of the term performative. Said in another way, in articulating his ideas *about* philosophy, he was simultaneously *enacting* them. In Berlin and Warnock’s narrations

of the Thursday evening and Saturday morning sessions, we are given a glimpse of Austin *performing* philosophy as a social act. Here, philosophy becomes a form of “collective labour” that privileges the dialogic and the intersubjective (Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy).

### Austin's Performativity

Interestingly, all three authors of the prosopographical accounts of Austin's teaching have made special mention of his authority. In his description of the Saturday morning sessions, Warnock describes an ambiance marked by a particular tension between formality and informality. With regards to Austin's comportment, he writes that he “cannot think of any comparable instance of personal authority so effortlessly exercised” (Warnock 1973, 32). George Pitcher expresses the same sentiment, almost verbatim, when he writes that he has “never before, or since, witnessed a comparable display of natural authority” (Pitcher 1973, 21). While the meetings were said to be “exceptionally fluid, free... continuously enjoyable and amusing – *funny*, in fact”, Warnock adds that they were “never just casual, and not even really relaxed” and that “it was always just a little as if the headmaster were present” (Warnock 1973, 32–33). In describing the format of the Saturday morning sessions, Pitcher reports that “the physical and dialectical centre of gravity located itself, predictably, in the person of Austin” explaining that Austin “sat in a wooden armchair with the rest of us deployed in a rough semicircle facing him. And the discussion inevitably assumed the shape of the physical layout: the remarks of the others seemed to be directed not to the group as a whole but to Austin...” (Pitcher 1973, 21).

The authority of the speaker, which Austin is reported to have embodied, is in fact one of the requirements of a successful Austinian performative utterance. In Austin's theory, performativity concerns the illocutionary level of language, which—unlike the locutionary and the perlocutionary—is governed by its *conventional* nature. In Austin's paradigmatic example of the marriage ceremony, a ritualistic and legal question is posed and marriage is then “performed” by means of a linguistic act. The success of this performative, however, depends upon the speaker's adherence to a set of conventions, several of which implicate the very *identity* of the speaker. Agency is not bestowed upon just anyone, but accompanies a certain privilege. Success is attributed to “certain persons” in “certain circumstances” – persons who are “appropriate” and who perform a given action “correctly” (Austin 1975, 16). Although Austin's theories did not consider this in the 1950s, these conditions anticipate the question of whether agency might arise from the performative act. Although the Austinian subject clearly preexists its acts, an examination of how Austin himself performed his thought suggests that his work anticipated the deconstructive theories of performativity propounded by Derrida and Butler in which agency comes into existence performatively.

The success or “felicity” (in Austin's terms) of the Austinian illocutionary act relies upon the *ethos* of the speaker—not only upon his identity, character and ego, but also upon his authority. The

speaker's agency is dependent upon his or her presence: "something" is "being done by the person uttering... at the moment of uttering" (Austin 1975, 60). This requirement is built into the very grammar of the performative utterance. Explicit performative utterances are all structured with their verbs in the first person singular present indicative active tense. While Austin later abandoned the idea of the existence of a grammatical criterion that defines all performative utterances, he did maintain that they must all be reducible or expandable to this grammatical form.

For literary critic J. Hillis Miller, the authority that Austin enjoyed as a white, male, upper class, European intellectual who, as White's Professor of Moral Philosophy, held one of the most prestigious (and one of only three) Chairs of Philosophy at Oxford guaranteed him certain privileges. First, it allowed him to segue between the serious tone of his philosophical argumentation and the rather grotesque examples that characterize his "undertext" (Miller 2001, 14). Miller has identified an underlying misogyny in *How To Do Things With Words*. Indeed, Austin's speaking "I" is implicitly male. It is the woman who is "taken" as wife and the man who does the taking (Miller 2001, 50–51). Queer theorists Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Andrew Parker have also drawn attention to the hetero-normative implication of exemplifying the marriage ceremony. For them, Austin's marginalization of the fictional bespeaks a homophobic rejection of the "perverse" (Sedgwick and Parker 1995, 5). In any case, Austin's own privilege is manifested in his theory of performativity, and he embodied the condition of authority.

Interestingly, however, Pitcher writes that in his lectures, Austin "resorted to no stage effects of any kind", and Warnock makes a point of stating that Austin "could not bear histrionics" (Pitcher, Warnock 1973, 18 and 43). Thus, while Austin enacted his theory of performativity in a performative manner, it is also notable that he avoided theatricality. In fact, as is well known, Austin completely excluded the theatrical, and the fictional in general, from his theory of performativity. This is made clear in the follow paragraph from *How To Do Things With Words*, which has been cited ad infinitum by theatre scholars:

... as utterances our performatives are also heir to certain other kinds of ill which infect all utterances. And these likewise, though again they might be brought into a more general account, we are deliberately excluding. I mean, for example, the following: a performative utterance will, for example, be in a peculiar way hollow or void if said by an actor on the stage, or if introduced in a poem, or spoken in a soliloquy. This applies in a similar manner to any and every utterance—a sea-change in special circumstances. Language in such circumstances is in special ways—intelligibly—used not seriously but in ways parasitic upon its normal use—ways which fall under the doctrine of the etiolations of language. All this we are excluding from consideration. (Austin 1975, 21–22)

Although Derrida's critique of Austinian performativity clearly demonstrated the problems of interpretive models based on authorial intention, Austin's more recent readers have dedicated much textual space to questioning the motivations behind his choice of the hardly benevolent terms "parasitic" and "etiolation" (Derrida 1988). Shannon Jackson sees in Austin's work the propagation of a kind of "anti-theatrical performativity" situated within many "anti-theatrical



prejudices that have vexed Western intellectual history" (Jackson 2004, 186). For Andrew Parker and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, the fact that despite Austin's attempts to marginalize the fictional, he relied upon it to construct his arguments, demonstrates that performativity has been "from its inception already infected with queerness" (Parker and Sedgwick 1995, 5). Literary theorist Shoshana Felman, on the other hand, stages Austin as a rebel of sorts, and accuses his self-professed "heirs" (in a footnote she cites John Searle and H.P. Grice) of failing to recognize the true performative dimension of his humor (Felman 2003, 99). For Felman, the performativity of Austin's work (what he *does* with words) lies in his literary allusions and his use of humor (Felman 2003, 48).

Was Austin's exclusion of the fictional ontological or methodological? Might it have been ironic? This last suggestion—that it could be ironic—is defended by the abundance of literary allusions found in *How To Do Things With Words*. At times explicitly and at other times implicitly, Austin cites or refers to Cervantes, Euripides, Voltaire, Donne, Whitman, and others. The Shakespearean echoes are particularly common, with allusions to Ariel's song in *The Tempest*, to the famous handkerchief in *Othello*, and to the pound of flesh in *The Merchant of Venice*. Thus while Austin adamantly excludes literature from his theory of performativity, he simultaneously relies upon it to dramatize his arguments. How, then, are we to reconcile Austin's clear exclusion of the fictional with his use of the fictional to expound his argument? And how might we distinguish between his theatricality and his performativity?

### Between Orality and Technologies of Writing: Performativity's "Bifurcated History"

Few publications, multiple lecture series given at universities around the world, a tradition of Thursday evening and Saturday morning meetings, and a talk on the national radio station... the Austin that emerges from this portrait is one who clearly preferred to produce and disseminate his research on performative utterances orally, dialogically, collectively, and pedagogically as opposed to publishing it in written form. Why might this be?

While by our contemporary standards, it might be tempting to attribute Austin's slim publication record to his lack of productivity as a scholar, I believe that historical context may help to clarify how scholarly conditions informed both Austin's choice of the modes with which he disseminated his works and the dramaturgical structures he deployed within them. Firstly, it appears that *not* publishing was common to the culture of Oxford philosophy at Austin's time. According to Austin's disciple, the American philosopher John Searle, who earned his Ph.D. as a Rhodes scholar at Oxford and went on to make the most important contribution to the field of speech act theory following Austin's death, "Oxford had a long tradition of not publishing during one's lifetime, indeed it was regarded as slightly vulgar to publish" (Searle 2007, 227).

Secondly, I maintain that the performativity of Austin's text is at play, not only with their modes of production, but with their very dramaturgy. In *How To Do Things With Words*, Austin offers scrupulous analyses of everyday language use and envisions multiple taxonomies to sharpen our understanding of performative utterances. The text unfolds in a temporality of the now. Austin



leads his readers through a series of methodological steps, often working by processes of exclusion in order to push an idea to its limits. We thus observe the philosopher thinking in the present tense, and we think alongside him in real time. Throughout the exposition of his ideas, Austin repeatedly confronts impasses. We, as his readers, become spectators to the dramatization of both the construction of his ideas and their breakdown, as in the case of the theoretical collapse of the performative/constative binary. Since Austin had already worked through these logical processes before the lectures were given, he clearly chose to *restage* them for his audience. This choice required a narrative form of writing that emphasized the processual nature of performativity.

J. Hillis Miller calls attention to the fact that Austin's work is situated within a strong philosophical tradition, reminding us that Plato's *Dialogues* also continually end at impasses in which Socrates proposed that they must take up the subject again at a later time. Miller cites the end of *Protagoras*, in which Socrates realized that virtue cannot be taught, as a parallel to Austin's inexhaustible attempts at reaching his goal (Miller 2001, 23). For Judith Butler, Austin displays "compulsive efforts to scrap the latest conceptual architectonic in favor of a new one". She goes on to say that: "He is not sure of his way, and he leaves the legacy of his misfires on the page for us to read" (Butler in Felman 2013, 121). Shoshana Felman affirms this, observing that: "Austin's research is modeled on anaphora, on repetition and beginnings", and that a finite goal or conclusion is never reached. For her, the fact of needing to constantly begin again puts the very act of research into the realm of the performative, as opposed to the constative (Felman 2013, 42–3). The performative nature of research is only heightened when the research concerns the concept of performativity, which Austin himself had shown could not be judged by its truth conditions. As Felman asks: "How, indeed, might one find the truth of that which, as such, deconstructs the criterion of truth itself?" (Felman 2013, 43).

In this sense, despite his dogged pursuit of clarity, Austin clearly avoided traditional, formal, and logical structures. One could say that he never arrives at propounding an argument, per se, ending his lecture, as I have mentioned, by offering to his readers "the real fun of applying it in philosophy" (Austin 1975, 164). Within this invitation, or solicitation, we may unearth a dialogical impulse, but also a *pedagogical* one. Austin was known to be an excellent teacher, and his influence was surely more widespread in this domain than it was through his publications. Austin began teaching philosophy at Oxford in 1935 and continued until his death. According to Berlin, it was his first classes that marked "the true beginning of Austin's career as an independent thinker" (Berlin 1973, 8). Commenting on the fact that Austin proposes to "make a fresh start on the problem" of defining the performative utterance *half-way* through *How To Do Things With Words*, Warnock reminds us that: "in lecturing, Austin was not merely expounding, he was teaching" (Austin 1975, 91 and Warnock 1989, 106). Clearly, Austin felt that this method of guiding his students and readers through a *re-enactment* of his thought process would be more effective than offering a constructed, linear, and teleological argument.

Austin first introduced his theory of the performative utterance within the context of a seminar. He continued to develop his ideas over the course of multiple lecture series, beginning with "Words and Deeds", and followed by the William James Lectures, which were in turn reused in later lectures

at Oxford. In a sense, each communication was like a public performance of a work-in-progress. Austin's writing process was an iterative one, in which oral and written communications fed back into each other, as in a loop. As such, his text was always already spoken, just as his speaking voice was always already textualized. This circular and iterative mechanics continued after Austin's death, with the eventual publication of *How To Do Things With Words*. That the book exists at all in its final published form owes everything to its editors; the text we have today, in which we situate the origin of performativity, is in fact a highly hybrid object.

The history of *How To Do Things With Words*, however, is not so uncommon. This is a point Martin Puchner made in his opening keynote at the colloquium "Theatre, Performance, Philosophy: Crossings and Transfers in Anglo-American Thought". Over the course of history, Puchner recalled, prophets often disseminated their teachings orally. As a result, many historical texts were in fact "written" by the students of the master after his or her death. Citing Jesus, Muhammad, and Socrates as ancient precedents, and Lacan and de Saussure as their contemporary equivalents, Puchner proposes that a closer look at these "scenes of instruction" could serve to problematize the priority or originality of the oral over the written word (Puchner 2014).

I would suggest that the production history of *How To Do Things With Words* situates performativity in what Puchner has labeled the "bifurcated history" of philosophy and theatre between orality and technologies of writing (Puchner 2014). Simply put, there is no single author of the inaugural text on the performative utterance, just as there is no "pure" performative utterance. In this way, the history of performativity may be said to complicate the very notion of authorship. While just a decade later, poststructuralist thinkers such as Roland Barthes, Michel Foucault, and Jacques Derrida would deconstruct the relationship between the author and the text, Austin stood on the cusp of modernism and postmodernism, anticipating these critiques. As J. Hillis Miller suggests, Austin both propounded a theory dependent upon the Cartesian ego and the full consciousness of the speaking subject, and at the same time engaged in a practice that troubled these notions (Miller 2001, 29).

My study of the contexts and methods through which Austin produced and disseminated his work on performative utterances has demonstrated how they complicate the notion of authority that Austin stipulated as a condition of a successful performative. It has also served to invalidate the narrative of the poor philosopher who published little. By rewriting this history, I offer up a portrait of a J.L. Austin engaged in a pragmatic practice in which philosophy *is* context. Austin clearly preferred dialogic, social, collective means of "doing" philosophy to the solitary practice of writing and publishing single-authored books that dominates academia today. His praxis of linguistic phenomenology may be best summed up in Austin's own words: "It takes two to make a truth" (Austin 1961, 92 note 1). Said in another way, Austin put into play his philosophy about performativity *performatively*. Performativity is haunted at its inception, by parasites, by literature, by the Other, by the ghosts that Austin tried so hard to exorcise, yet that—on some level of consciousness—he simultaneously allowed, or perhaps even summoned up, to haunt his philosophical voice.

## To Be *and* Not To Be: Hauntology and the Metaphysics of the Voice

MARCELLUS

Peace, break thee off; look, where it comes again!

BERNARDO

In the same figure, like the king that's dead.

MARCELLUS

Thou art a scholar; speak to it, Horatio.

Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, Act I, Scene I

It is these ghosts—both Austin's ghost and the ghosts that haunt his ghost—that I hope to encounter through the medium of Austin's voice as I sit down to listen to the recording of "Performatives". As it turns out, however, I am not seduced by Austin's voice. His nasal, tenor tonality has something of a distancing effect on me. I am, on the other hand, quite *affected* by the experience. This is perhaps due to my knowledge that Austin died only three months after he delivered the Gothenburg lecture. Housed in these sound bytes, then, is the last known public, sonic record of his existence. To borrow a term from Derrida's semantic repertoire, the recording I am listening to represents a "trace"—"the mark of an anterior presence" (Spivak in Derrida 1997, xv). As Derrida described it, "a trace is never present, fully present, by definition; it inscribes in itself the reference to the specter of something else" (Derrida 2005, 151).

The specter of something else. But what is this elusive "something else"? What if this "something else" only refers me to another spectral object and throws me into an eternal chain of citational hauntings? Here, I recall the words of performance studies scholar Peggy Phelan who alluded to Freud when describing the difficulties of unearthing the relationship between the primary and the copy: "Any search for an origin is hysterical" (Phelan 2014). Like Derrida's specter, Austin's voice is marked by a temporal ambiguity that attests to his "having-been present in a past now" (Derrida 1988, 20). But what if he never manifests or makes himself present again? As I write this, I feel somewhat guilty, for the last thing I would want to do is offend a ghost....

MARCELLUS

It is offended.

BERNARDO

See, it stalks away!

HORATIO

Stay! speak, speak! I charge thee, speak!

*Exit Ghost*

*Hamlet*, Act I, Scene I

In his literary analysis, Miller portrays Austin as a man “who has exorcised a ghost only to find that it keeps coming back” and states that “literature is the ghost that haunts *How to Do Things with Words*”. He refers to the “ghost of poetry that cannot be exorcised”, and claims that Austin’s literary allusions involve “an intrusive apparition of the etiolated”. It is said that literature “keeps rising from the dead” (Miller 2001, 18, 37, 49, 40, respectively).

The figure of the ghost is, of course, a common trope within performance studies discourse. Within these analyses, one particularly famous ghost makes a regular (re)appearance: that of Hamlet’s Father. Performance studies scholar Richard Schechner, for one, references Laurence Olivier’s production of *Hamlet* in his well-known formula of double-negativity, the “not not me”, which describes the scripted nature of performance and ritual. There, he suggests that when on stage, Olivier both *is* and *is not* Hamlet, and that as such his words both do and do not belong to him, just as they do and do not belong to Shakespeare and to Hamlet (Schechner 1985, 92).

In his 1993 work of political philosophy, *Specters of Marx*, Derrida makes multiple allusions to Hamlet, thereby inviting us to consider the parallel between the ghost of an ideology haunting Europe and the ghost that haunts Shakespeare’s protagonist. There, Derrida introduces his concept of “hauntology”—a homophone for “ontology” in French— in order to describe the paradoxical state of physical absence and immaterial presence with which the ghost is imbued.

In its negotiation between presence and absence, the voice may be said to be inherently “hauntological”. It strikes me that performativity resides at the locus of the same series of binary oppositions as the voice—those of presence and absence, materiality and immateriality, discursivity and corporeality, speech and writing, lack and excess. Austin’s performative voice (a voice which vehicles a discourse about performativity) is produced by and within his body, yet it escapes and exceeds it.

In his famous essay “The Grain of the Voice”, Roland Barthes theorizes the space of “encounter” or “friction” between language and voice as something that transcends the linguistic by implicating the “materiality of the body” (Barthes 1977, 182). There, he gives the name of the “grain” to “the body in the voice as it sings, the hand as it writes, the limb as it performs” (Barthes 1977, 182). Within this wonderful formula, we may understand the grain of the voice as the intersection between orality, writing, and performance—the three elements at play within Austinian performativity. Austin’s voice (which is both spoken and written) emerges through a process of writing (which is also speech). However, as I listen to Austin’s lecture, I realize that unlike the apparition of Hamlet’s father who, in the opening scene of the play is visible, but mute, Austin’s ghost is invisible, but audible. He speaks, albeit acousmatically.

## Acousmatic Sound: Reliving an “Ancient Tradition”

MARCELLUS

What, has this thing appear'd again to-night?

BERNARDO

I have seen nothing.

*Enter Ghost*

*Hamlet, Act I, Scene I*

In 1955 (the same year that Austin gave the celebrated William James Lectures), the French composer and founder of concrete music Pierre Schaeffer published an article in which he used the term “acousmatic” to describe the experience of hearing a sound whose productive source is not visible. Schaeffer explains that the term, whose etymology derives from the Greek word ἀκουσματικοί (*akousmatikos*) that stems from the root ἀκούω (*akouō*, “I hear”), was originally attributed to the uninitiated auditors (i.e. disciples) of the ancient Greek philosopher Pythagoras. Legend holds that the students in Pythagoras’ sect underwent three years of training followed by five years of silence before they were elevated to the status of the *mathēmatikoi*, or the learned. During this probationary period, the disciples were obliged to listen to their master’s lectures from behind a black curtain. Only the initiated were privy to the ritualistic ceremonies of the Pythagorean order that took place behind this mysterious veil. Only they were permitted to see their master. The uninitiated were obliged to listen acousmatically.

For Schaeffer, the “ancient tradition” of Pythagoras and his students finds its contemporary equivalent in modern technologies such as the radio and the phonograph, where seeing and listening are dissociated (Schaeffer 2004, 77). Schaeffer describes the acousmatic experience in terms evocative of a Husserlian phenomenological reduction. By bracketing out the thing-in-itself and concentrating on the thing-as-perceived, the listener achieves a heightened awareness of the content of perception. What emerges is a “sound object” (*un objet sonore*) that “marks the perceptive reality of sound as such, as distinguished from the modes of its production and transmission” (Schaeffer 2004, 77).

The French film critic Michel Chion takes up Schaeffer’s work on acousmatic sound in his 1999 book *The Voice in Cinema*, noting that because hearing (as opposed to vision) is omnidirectional, “the *acousmètre* is everywhere” (Chion 1999, 24). Chion posits a ubiquitous voice – one that is both omniscient and omnipotent, and therefore evocative of the voice of God. Much as how, in the context of the cinema, acousmatic voice emanates from the hors champs, Pythagoras’ voice is said to have instructed his disciples from behind a screen, imbuing him with a godly and disembodied quality.

With his 2014 *Sound Unseen: Acousmatic Sound in Theory and Practice*, musicologist Brian Kane offers an impressive and fastidious study of the phenomenon of acousmatic sound that exposes many of the myths about the Pythagorean school as apocryphal. In chapter two of his book, Kane forcefully demonstrates that none of the ancient texts on Pythagoras make mention of the veil behind which the philosopher allegedly taught.<sup>4</sup> In fact, drawing on the Syrian neoplatonic philosopher Iamblichus, who reports that the Pythagoreans spoke in a deliberately cryptic manner, Kane reveals that the veil in question may well have been figural or allegorical, and not literal. Kane's hypothesis is that Schaeffer and his followers perpetuated a very selective account of the Pythagorean legend with which they could mimetically identify.

Such myths constitute, as Kane points out, what French philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy calls "primal scenes"—scenes that act as "founding fiction(s)" about our cultural origins: "Concentrated within the idea of myth is perhaps the entire presentation on the part of the West to appropriate its own origin, or to take away its secret, so that it can at last identify itself, absolutely, around its own pronouncement and its own birth" (Nancy 1991, 53). More poignant than uncovering the historical "truth" about the "origin" of the Pythagorean veil, at least for my own purposes here, is to question this desire to identify a precise origin.

Over two millennia later, far removed both spatially and temporally from ancient Greece, I, too, engage in an acousmatic experience by listening to Austin's lecture from behind the veil of a sonic screen. Like the proponents of electronic music discussed above, I, too, am inclined to narrate my affective, phenomenological experience by evoking the mythical acousmatikoi. Aligning my experience with theirs gives me the impression that I am restaging, or even reliving, an ancient tradition.

My encounter with Austin began with a performative action: the conjuring of a ghost. Once graced with its (hauntological) presence, I became part of a secondary audience of listeners who experienced Austin's teachings not *viva voce*, but like the students in the myth of Pythagoras, acousmatically. As I perform silence, the disembodied voice of the tape recording exits the speakers of my laptop computer. When Austin "speaks", it is through a form of ghostly ventriloquy, and my home becomes "unheimlich" as this familiar stranger enters the space.<sup>5</sup>

I was informed by the generous professors at the University of Gothenburg that there were many complications in digitalizing the recording of Austin's lecture due to the fragile state of the original tape. Furthermore, because of the unusual speed at which the lecture was recorded, it had first to be slowed down and then sped up in order to recreate the original tempo of Austin's voice. Finally, because the mp3 file was too large, it had to be ripped in a smaller bitrate and converted into mono so that it could be sent to me via email. What I am listening to, then, is an object that has been highly manipulated in order to achieve the effect of the natural or the original. As Schaeffer argues, "...although it is materialized by the magnetic tape [here the mp3], the object....is not on the tape either. What is on the tape is only the magnetic trace of a signal" (Schaeffer 2004, 79).

In 1959, this recording saved Austin's signifiers from disappearing immediately after their utterance. Severed from their origin, they continue to act in the absence of their productive source.

The uncanny technology of sound reproduction enables the voice to continue to perform and to exert agency in the absence, and even after the death, of its author. Applying Schechner's formula of double negativity to Schaeffer's theorization of a recording as a magnetic trace of a signal, the sonorous object with which I interact may be said to be "not not Austin". (It both and is not Austin). The recording deconstructs the hierarchy between source and signal. It also produces a substitute body—one that is both technological and textualized.

As I listen to Austin's embodied/disembodied/re-embodied voice (which he might have described with his famous term "etiolated"), it strikes me that his parasite—the ghost of fiction—has come back to haunt him, although in another sense than Miller proposed. The technology through which Austin disseminated his lecture eventually *turned him into a ghost*. This, then, is the fundamental uncanniness of telecommunications. Speech (which is always already writing) circles back on itself and becomes yet another form of writing. Because it is produced by and within the body, the voice gives the impression of a direct and intimate link to the subjectivity, and even the very flesh, of the other. But at the same time, it is marked by an absence, a lack, and the impossibility of this connection. Austin seems displaced, and my efforts to reach him seem increasingly to be in vain.

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In the recording, Austin's lecture is followed by a question and answer session, in which his voice is absorbed into a sea of other voices and ambient noises from the room. A door creaks open or closed. There is laughter, commotion. These sounds are in turn muffled by various parasites such as static and feedback from the microphone. The last intelligible sentence is spoken, not by Austin, but by one of his interlocutors. Addressing Austin in a strong, Swedish accent, the unknown voice asks: "where are you going after...?"

With that, the recording cuts off. Once again, I find myself surrounded by silence and by another kind of absence. The ghost is gone. Or is it? And so I end as I began: with a consciousness of consciousness, and with the waiting for an apparition. "Any search for an origin is hysterical". Full stop.



## Notes

<sup>1</sup> I would like to express my sincere gratitude to Prof. Peter Johnson, Director of Studies, and Prof. Christina Thomsen Thörnqvist, Senior Lecturer and Associate Professor at the Department of Philosophy, Linguistics and Theory of Science at the University of Gothenberg for their generosity and efficiency.

<sup>2</sup> In her book *The Scandal of the Speaking Body: Don Juan with J.L. Austin, or Seduction in Two Languages*, Shoshana Felman confesses that she is seduced by Austin's writing.

<sup>3</sup> As with the lives of many academics of that era, Austin's career was interrupted by the war. Austin served as a decoder in the British Intelligence Corps for a period of six years, contributing enormously to the D-Day intelligence project. He left the army as a highly decorated lieutenant.

<sup>4</sup> In addition to Aristotle, Kane looks to the uncited text by the Syrian neoPlatonic philosopher Iamblichus (c. 245–325 C.E.) who influenced both Schaeffer and Diderot's accounts of acousmatics and Clement of Alexandria's (c.150–c215 C.E.) *Stromateis*.

<sup>5</sup> In his famous article "Das Unheimliche" (first published in German in 1919), Sigmund Freud introduced the concept of the "unheimliche" or the "uncanny" to qualify the cognitive dissonance produced within a subject who experiences the return of something that is simultaneously familiar and unfamiliar. See: Freud, Sigmund, "The Uncanny", *The Uncanny*, David McLintock (trans.), New York: Penguin Books, 2003.

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## Biography

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